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**EXISTENTIAL POETICS IN 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY  
LATIN AMERICA**

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## EXISTENTIAL POETICS IN 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY LATIN AMERICA

## POÉTICA EXISTENCIAL EN LA AMÉRICA LATINA DECIMONÓNICA

*Edwin Murillo*

### ABSTRACT

Typically, the origin story of Existentialism has depicted Latin America's contributions as subsequent and tributary to its European counterpart. Nevertheless, a select few critics have approached this history in Hispanic America from a chronologically inclusive perspective, by calling attention to an Existential Poetics in *modernismo*. This article expands the borders of Existential Poetics to fashion a Latin American literary imaginary. Given the work already done on Rubén Darío and José Martí, both of whom have been studied independently, my analysis will be collective, favoring philopoetic works by Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, Julián del Casal, José Asunción Silva, and João Cruz e Sousa. The purpose of examining Hispanic-American poets in conjunction with a Brazilian is to accentuate the Pan-American quality of this Existentialism *avant la lettre*. As I will discuss, all these poems deal with a crisis of irrelevance and overtly question being in the world, classic motifs of Existentialism. Together, these poems allow for the synchronized inclusion of Latin American voices to the universal history of Existentialism, an approach not explicitly carried out by most philosophical and literary historiographers.

**Key words:** Existentialism; Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera; Julián del Casal; José Asunción Silva; João Cruz e Sousa.

### RESUMEN

Típicamente, la historia sobre el origen del Existencialismo ha representado las contribuciones de América Latina como subsecuentes y tributarias a Europa. Sin embargo, algunos críticos selectos han abordado esta historia en Hispanoamérica desde una perspectiva cronológicamente inclusiva, llamando la atención hacia una poética-existencial en el modernismo. Este artículo expande las fronteras de lo poético-existencial para formar un imaginario literario latinoamericano. Dado el trabajo ya realizado sobre Rubén Darío y José Martí, que han sido estudiados independientemente, nuestro análisis es colectivo, favoreciendo obras filopoéticas de Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, Julián del Casal, José Asunción Silva y João Cruz e Sousa. El propósito de examinar a poetas hispanoamericanos en conjunto con un brasileño es el de acentuar la calidad panamericana de este Existencialismo *avant la lettre*. Como analizaremos, todos estos poemas se enfrentan a una crisis de irrelevancia y reflexionan abiertamente sobre el existir en el mundo, motivos clásicos del existencialismo. En conjunto, estos poemas admiten la inclusión sincronizada de voces latinoamericanas en la historia universal del existencialismo, una aproximación no realizada explícitamente por la mayoría de los historiadores filosóficos y literarios.

**Palabras clave:** Existencialismo; Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera; Julián del Casal; José Asunción Silva; João Cruz e Sousa.

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José Olivio Jiménez, in his now classic anthology, refers to a philosophical mode palpable in Hispanic-American *modernismo* that he called the “poético-existencial” (henceforth Existential Poetics). The objective of this article is to provide an operational definition of the term Existential Poetics and to expand its signifying reach to include Brazilian *simbolismo*, the chronological and ideological equivalent of *modernismo*<sup>1</sup>. With the aim of offering a representative sample of a larger philopoetic reality in Latin America, I focus on Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera’s “¿Para qué?”, Julián del Casal’s “La mayor tristeza”, José Asunción Silva’s “Filosofías” and João Cruz e Sousa’s “Cogitação” and “Sorriso Interior”<sup>2</sup>. These poems function as a synecdoche of presence for Latin American Existentialism, where overemphasis has been given to Rubén Darío as an originating force, and to a much lesser degree José Martí. The purpose of examining Hispanic-American poets in conjunction with a Brazilian is to accentuate the Pan-American quality of the questioning of being in the world, which is a common concern for all these poets. This thematic common denominator represents a Latin American confrontation with existence that has been alluded to, but not explicitly studied collectively.

Classic historical studies of Existentialism, such as those by Julián Marías (1953) and William Barrett (1958), and as well as contemporary interpretations, place the epicentral origin of Existentialism in the nineteenth century<sup>3</sup>. Documenting the Hispanic contribution to the canon, both Marías and Barret return to the Generation of 1898, specifically to Unamuno, and the accompanying aesthetic and ethical reevaluations taking place, as a literary ground zero<sup>4</sup>. The limited scholarship on Hispanic-America’s contribution to that same history focuses on Darío, a contemporary of Unamuno, as the primary case. Thoroughly justifiable arguments for the Nicaraguan poet’s inclusion in the Existentialism canon are credited to the groundbreaking work of Francisco Peñas Bermejo, while the aforementioned Jiménez draws attention to his compatriot, Martí<sup>5</sup>. However, as mentioned previously, Jiménez alludes to an Existential Poetic undercurrent to some *modernistas*, crediting them with “la expresión vivencial de una época, sellada por el espíritu de crisis y la derivada situación vital de angustia e incertidumbre” (1989, p. 42)<sup>6</sup>. Unfortunately, while Jiménez accurately identifies sociocultural antagonisms that manifest as aesthetic crisis and uncertainty in the philosophical *modernistas*, the Cuban literary critic does not name these explicitly, and confines the parameters of the Existential Poetic to Martí in his own research<sup>7</sup>. As we will see, the Existential Poetics connoted by Jiménez are tangible beyond Darío and Martí.

## 1. Necessary Crisis

The poems that will be analyzed here focus on a crisis of irrelevance and insufficiency, an artistic phenomenon termed ennui, *weltschmerz*, and *splénique* in other literary traditions. In its Hispanic America and Brazil variation, this generalized *fin de siècle* malcontent stimulated both *modernismo* and *simbolismo*. Carlos Javier Morales describes the social transformations that spurred the crisis of irrelevance for the poets of this era in the following manner: “[E]n ese mundo occidental del último tercio del XIX proliferan la industria y el afán de riquezas materiales; la religión parece haber cedido su ministerio a las ciencias experimentales y a la técnica” (2000, p. 38). Imbedded and reactionary to the modernity described by Morales, from the late 1880s to the late 1920s, an internalized philopoetic voice emerged focused on ontological concerns. These ontological concerns, incited by modernity’s devaluing of their societal relevance, adds to the critical complexity of Hispanic *modernismo* and Brazilian

*simbolismo*, both of which continue to be over-associated with Ivory-Towerism. Given the temporal and ideological commonalities of both poetic movements, it is understandable how the problem of inconsequence became central. On a macro-level, these poets suffered a crisis of irrelevance in terms of their diminished significance in modern society, on a micro-level they dealt with a crisis of irrelevance in terms of their personal existence; in other words, what meaning could they find in being in the world?

Simply stated, Jiménez's use of the term "poético-existencial" denotes poetic Existentialism, or conversely Existential Poetics, as it relates to French *l'existentialisme*<sup>8</sup>. Nevertheless, since the poets studied here are all from the nineteenth-century, and Existentialism in the manner engaged by Jiménez did not formally crystalize until well into the twentieth century, what we are dealing with is anticipatory Existentialism in poetic form<sup>9</sup>. By anticipatory Poetic Existentialism I mean those poems which, via the re-humanization of existence, question the purpose and place of being in the modern world. Sabino Alonso-Fueyo in one of the first studies of Existentialism in Spanish, underscores a core of themes Existential thinkers have in common, predominantly "la preocupación por la aventura del hombre en el Mundo; la prioridad de la existencia sobre la esencia" (1949, p. 40). Other common motifs of Existential Poetics are the reconceptualization of will and the confrontation with the challenges of authentic being. In the Existential Poetic mode dealt with here, the lyrical voice confronts a radical vacuity of essences that thrusts choice, responsibility, and accountability unto the conscious being. These themes are ever present in the work of canonical figures like Kierkegaard, Unamuno, and Camus, and manifest consistently in the Proto-Existentialism poetry of Gutiérrez Nájera, Casal, Silva and Cruz e Sousa.

Historically, the root cause for the anticipatory Existential Poetic crisis that energized many of these Latin American voices had a proper name: Positivism<sup>10</sup>. The methodical expansion of positivistic ideologies, the credence in societal evolution, economic industrialization, secularization and hierarchical reorganization, and the subsequent artistic displacement it produced, also created an irrelevance consciousness for several of the most skeptical literary voices of the time. Picon Garfield and Schulman described that atmosphere as "un momento complejo de rápidas transiciones socio-culturales, época agitada en que el hombre se encuentra en el centro de un universo de estructuras inestables" (1984, p. 108). The unstable, and transitioning societal structures mentioned above pushed forward an uneven, and in several cases, authoritative modernity engaged by the disciples of positivism. These devotees took prominent roles in political and cultural spaces of influence, as in the case of Gabino Barreda and Justo Sierra in the *Porfiriato* of Mexico, Enrique José Varona during several periods of political instability in Cuba, and José María Samper in the conservative Colombian *regeneracionismo* of Rafael Núñez and Miguel Antonio Cano. In Brazil, the positivist fervor, Comtean in nature, was transmitted through the work of Luis Pereira Barreto, Benjamín Constant, and other members of the *Apostolado Positivista do Brasil*, intellectuals that Roberto Gargarella views as foundational to the modernizing projects of the new republic<sup>11</sup>.

The turbulent decades that close the nineteenth and inaugurate the twentieth centuries, identifiable as consistently modernizing, are an atmosphere unsympathetic to the contra-utilitarian writers of *modernismo* and *simbolismo* represented here. The aforementioned Picon Garfield and Schulman described these modernizing decades of the 1880s to the 1910s as a locus of "vacío cultural e ideológico" (1984, p. 108). However, given the prominence of positivism as a substitute to the old colonial (post-independence) order, a true vacuum did not

exist. Instead, the crisis that galvanizes Gutiérrez Nájera, Casal, Silva and Cruz e Sousa is not of vacuity but transvaluation. In the works that I will discuss next, the poetic voice documents the effects of that crisis of reevaluation and transition, that has been approached from a strictly aesthetic perspective, but which in this case reflects a distinctly Existential Poetic posture, that is, a fixated ontological agenda.

## 2. Synecdoche of Presence

In his thorough examination of the Existential quality of Rubén Darío's work, Peña Bermejo rightfully grants the Nicaraguan a foundational place for twentieth-century Spanish poetry. As Peña Bermejo explains, Darío's poetics go beyond Ivory-Towerism and address the problems of "la subjetividad, el sentido de la existencia, el tiempo, la muerte o el dolor por la vida" (1993, p. 313)<sup>12</sup>. Other pillars of *modernismo*, namely Gutiérrez Nájera, Casal, and Silva, actively engage similar questionings of being, providing further gravitas to writers most remembered for their romantic and pessimist legacies<sup>13</sup>.

Chronologically, the most anticipatory of the Proto-Existentialists was Gutiérrez Nájera. Within the Mexican's elegiac poetics, for which he is most evoked, we also find an undeniably ontological complex. "To Be" (1886), "Pax animae" (1890) and in particular "Para entonces" (1887) are the most cited examples of Gutiérrez Nájera's philopoetic texts. Likewise, "Monólogo del incrédulo" (1887) and "Almas huérfanas" (1890) predate Darío's own Proto-Existentialist opus *Cantos de vida y esperanza* (1905). In broad terms, both "To Be" and "Monólogo del incrédulo" are exaltations of pain and the questioning of the rationale in engaging life, while conversely "Pax animae" is an exhortation to action. "Para entonces" and "Almas huérfanas" are melancholic odes of disillusionment, although "Para entonces" is the least Existentialist in the vein studied here<sup>14</sup>. The clarity of "¿Para qué?" (1880), part of the *Caminos del viento* collection, warrants special attention. "¿Para qué?", overlooked by critics, is indispensable to any history of *existencialismo* because of its contemporaneity with the earliest Existentialists<sup>15</sup>. The poem, an overt instance of Existential Symbolism, is composed of ten sextets of Alexandrian verses and communicates the despair of the poetic voice confronted with the insurmountable power of death. The poem can be grouped into scenes: stanzas one to four denote life using navigation symbols, stanzas five to seven structures the explicit ontological inquiries of the poetic "I", and stanzas eight to ten return to voyage symbolism to signify traveling (*i.e.* existence) as despair.

The first four verses of "¿Para qué?" delineate the spiritual collapse of the poetic "I". For the speaker, the monotony of life is aggravated by an absence of purpose. In the Existentialist core of the poem, verses five, six and seven, the reader finds a methodical flow of questions that capture the presenter's uneasiness:

¿Adónde navegamos? ¿Quién rige la faena?  
 ¿A qué las inquietudes, las luchas y la pena  
 si el capitán maltrata y el termino es ruín?  
 Cualquier que sea el sitio, cualquier que sea el puerto,  
 en los revueltos mares, igual que en el desierto,  
 por mucho que luchemos la muerte será el fin. (Gutiérrez Nájera, 1966, p. 225)

This stanza is a microcosm of the ontological concerns that make of the poem an explicit contribution to any Existentialism history. Many years later, in an explicitly philosophical context, Unamuno would engage a similar irrelevance problem. The Basque

philosopher diagnosed the compulsion of a similar line of questioning as a symptom of the eternity enigma. As Unamuno establishes, the question of humanity's relevance is spurred by a will towards certainty:

¿Por qué quiero saber de dónde vengo y adónde voy, de dónde viene y adónde va lo que me rodea, y qué significa todo esto? Porque no quiero morir del todo, y quiero saber si he de morir o no definitivamente (2003, p. 34)

In Gutiérrez Nájera's case, we are presented with a skeptical voice, purposefully crafting the idea that existence is cruel and finite. Verses twenty-five and twenty-six use navigational symbols, begun in the second sextet, to convey the idea of life as a painful odyssey, an epic journey plagued by obstacles and unpredictability. However, the tenor of the poetic voice is defiant. The providential skepticism, evident when the philopoetic voice asks "¿Quién rige la faena?", signals a dissatisfaction not only with that anguished being but with the supposed purveyor of existence. For the lyrical voice, death's incontrovertible presence is a universal Existential certitude applicable to all regardless of social status. As such, the poetic voice explains that irrespective of presence or reputation "la muerte será el fin"<sup>16</sup>.

In the climactic third act, stanzas eight to ten, exasperation permeates the verses. The inevitability of death renders inconsequential the struggles of being for the poetic voice. In stanza ten, the speaker returns to nautical symbols to convey the sense of inescapability:

Quisiera de la nave salirme fugitivo;  
No puedo y me resigno. Vivir es ser cautivo...  
Echado en la sentina mi vida pasará  
No quiero entrar en lucha con hombres ni deidades;  
ya soplen los alisios o rujan tempestades,  
aquí, sin agitarme, la muerte esperaré. (Gutiérrez Nájera, 1966, p. 226)

For the lyrical "I", the senselessness of existence is sustained by individual impotence, the futility of being of the world yet concomitant to it. Unable to reconcile itself with a reality devoid of reason, the poetic voice refuses to participate in the turbulence of what it deems to be an inauthentic existence. Concluding the nautical leitmotiv, the poetic voice prefers a catatonic life in "la sentina" instead of the empty duplicity of social life. The choice of a disjointed and indifferent life aboard this fatalistic boat is a gesture of total rejection. By preferring the bilge, the poetic speaker is symbolically rejecting (and recriminating) a worldview opposite to his, which is to say the laborious and conformist principles of those inauthentic beings condemned to death. The position of the poetic voice is categorical and proclaims that "ya soplen los alisios o rujan tempestades, / aquí, sin agitarme, la muerte esperaré". In general, this text synthesizes the symptoms of poetic malaise as a manifestation of disownment. The reader observes a philopoetic voice unconvinced by ideas of adventure or duty, the lure of love or fortune, nor noble struggles against destiny, as the poem reads "No quiero entrar en lucha con hombres ni deidades". In short, the poem is an individual rejection of collective values.

Gutiérrez Nájera's poem also serves as an overt manifestation of *memento mori* (i.e. remember that you have to die), an ever-present artistic motif since Medievalist times. Unlike classical antiquity's use of death as vital reminder of life (e.g. as exaltation towards Horatian *carpe diem*), or the positioning of *memento mori* as moralizing agent in the Spanish Baroque, with the *modernistas*, mortality allows for reflections that are less ascetic and more ideologically ambiguous. In the Spanish Baroque, *memento mori* had a clear indoctrinating agenda, as José Vicente Salido López explains it became a constant "reflexión en tono penitencial sobre la cercanía de la muerte y la conveniencia de una vida virtuosa orientada a su

preparación” (2015, p. 226). For Gutiérrez Nájera, and the other Proto-Existentialists analyzed here, confronting one’s mortality results not in repentant introspection but rather reflective exasperation culminating in a skeptical, irresolute, and defiant poetic tone<sup>17</sup>.

Julián del Casal’s “La mayor tristeza”, from his collection *Hojas al viento* (1890), also grieves the seemingly purposeless life, whilst acknowledging the inescapability of death. The text, structurally a Petrarchan sonnet, is Casal’s poetization of the importance of enterprise for the modern self’s realization of sufficiency. Well into the twentieth century, José Ortega y Gasset also emphasized the vital role of engaged “quehacer” in authentic existence. As the Spanish philosopher explained in his monumental *Historia como sistema*, the individual that rejects abulia “al encontrarse con que existe, al acontecerle existir, lo único que encuentra o le acontece es no tener más remedio que hacer algo para no dejar de existir” (2007, p. 85)<sup>18</sup>. The significance of engagement in existence, central to the diagnosis of being in modern society, is also present in Casal’s Existential elegy. The vital consciousness expressed in the sonnet counterbalances the dandyism most of his work is associated with. Other repurposed sonnets, such as “Desolación” and “Paisaje espiritual” (1892) expand the Casalian poetic universe that critics have diagrammed as invested in love, faith in poetry, and of course, dissatisfaction with the Cuban bourgeoisie. The aforementioned poems, and in particular “La mayor tristeza” offer an incisive judgment of authentic being, presenting purposelessness as the apex of bad faith. In its entirety the sonnet reads as follows:

¡Triste del que atraviesa solitario  
el árido camino de la vida  
sin encontrar la hermosa prometida  
que lo ayude a subir hasta el calvario!

¡Triste del que, en recóndito santuario,  
le pide a Dios que avive la extinguida  
fe que lleva en el alma dolorida  
cual seca flor en roto relicario!

¡Pero más triste del que, en honda calma  
sin creer en Dios ni en la mujer hermosa,  
sufre el azote de la humana suerte,

Y siente descender sobre su alma,  
cual sudario de niebla tenebrosa,  
el silencio profundo de la muerte! (Casal, 2001, pp. 59-60)

In his emblematic pessimistic tone, Casal’s poem opens by confronting the ideals of love and faith as palliative measures for engaging in life. The portrait of being that the poetic voice offers depicts life as solitary and arduous and ultimately promised to death, standard Existentialist interpretations of human existence. Love, and more precisely, the pursuit of love as a “quehacer”, is represented as a comforting engagement for the individual, bereft of ultimate deliverance. In the second verse, the poetic voice laments both the loss of individual faith and the complicity of a silent God<sup>19</sup>. It is worth recalling that Unamuno, a decade later in his “Salmo I” from his *Poesías*, would express a similar frustration with his own unsympathetic God. In Unamuno’s case, the poetic voice is exhortatory: “¿Por qué, Señor, no te nos muestras sin velos, sin engaños? / ¿Por qué, Señor, nos dejas en la duda, duda de muerte? / ¿Por qué te escondes?” (2001, p. 147). Casal’s indictment of an unresponsive God, exclamation points notwithstanding, admonishes divine silence without forfeiting the idea of God, that is without



succumbing to the allure of atheism, like other religious Existentialists<sup>20</sup>. Casal's reproach is implicit: "Triste del que, en recóndito santuario / le pide a Dios que avive la extinguida fe". Given that faith is extinguished, and remains so at the end of the poem, the lyrical voice is recriminating both God's role in the nullification of belief (*i.e.* divine silence has symbolically desiccated faith, hence the image of the "seca flor en roto relicario") and in its incomplete restoration. Much like Kierkegaard before him and the aforementioned Unamuno after, Casal's reproach does not equate to atheistic acceptance, but rather an unresolved religious tension that categorically sides with engagement.

The closing verses function as a rebuke of abulia. The octave represents the forlorn assessment of life as pursuit without attainment, while the sestet is the complete surrender to a catatonic state. Explicitly, the poetic voice favors the latter. In this regard, the adversative conjunction "pero" clarifies unambiguously what constitutes "la mayor tristeza". The total rejection of "quehacer", in this case, romantic and religious belief, constitutes the greatest Existential anguish, given the unavoidability of human suffering and death. The closing stanzas poetically advocate action as means to relevance given that resigning one's faith, or refusing love, constitutes "La mayor tristeza". As the poetic voice declares, conscious pursuit is preferable to disconnection with life, theorizing as the worst possible mode of existence that which chooses to subsist "sin creer en Dios ni en la mujer hermosa". In short, the poetic voice favors engagement in being, from a dynamic perspective, even when that engagement results irrational and offers zero guarantees<sup>21</sup>.

José Asunción Silva's venture into an anthropocentric meditation on being, particularly his diagnosis in "Filosofías" from his *Gotas amargas* (1908), employs satire to critique modern existence<sup>22</sup>. *Gotas amargas*, in general, and "Filosofías", specifically, is the Colombian's most caustic stance. As María Dolores Jaramillo explains, *Gotas amargas* "se aleja del ornato, la simetría y el cuidado formal de la escuela modernista y abre un nuevo camino a la poesía de Silva hacia una visión satírica de la sociedad y sus valores" (1993, p. 160). The satire of bourgeoisie existence crystalizes in poems like "El mal de siglo", "La respuesta de la tierra", "Cápsulas", and "Futura". The satirical voice of "Filosofías" consists of eighteen quartets with an alternate rhyme scheme which represents Silva's most comprehensive dismantling of the ideological shortcomings of his era. In the poem, the tension is sustained through thematic pairings of stanzas, wherein the retort of the latter quartet undoes the bourgeoisie ideal of the former. Only the third stanza breaks this pattern and is more representative of avant-garde symbolism than of the philopoetic realism present in the entirety of the text.

"Filosofías" is a parody of aphoristic literature. The first pairing derides hedonism, restraint, and scientism. Hedonism is ridiculed for its egocentrism; restraint is disparaged because it fails as an avoidance tactic. Medical terminology functions to underscore the fallibility of science, as both the hedonist and the ascetic cannot be safeguarded from human frailty. The ensuing pairings in stanzas four through nine deal with modern life, art, and faith:

Trabaja sin cesar, batalla, suda,  
vende vida por oro:  
conseguirás una dispepsia aguda  
mucho antes que un tesoro.

Y tendrás ¡oh placer!, de la pesada  
digestión en el lance,  
ante la vista ansiosa y fatigada  
las cifras de un balance.

Al arte sacrificate: ¡combina,  
pule, esculpe, extrema!  
¡Lucha, y en la labor que te asesina,  
–lienzo, bronce o poema–,  
pon tu esencia, tus nervios, tu alma toda!  
¡Terrible empresa vana!,  
pues que tu obra no estará a la moda  
de pasado mañana.

No: sé creyente, fiel, toma otro giro  
y la razón prosterna  
a los pies del absurdo: ¡compra un giro  
contra la vida eterna!

Págalo con tus goces; la fe aviva;  
ora, metida, impetra;  
y al morir pensarás: ¿y si allá arriba  
no me cubren la letra? (Silva, 2006, pp. 255-259)

Stanzas four and five engage the materialist notion that equates hard work and high reward. The poetic voice is sardonic, asserting that such sacrifice will more likely yield chronic ailment than a financial windfall. The poetic voice's contempt for modern life's relentlessness is evident in the fifth stanza when the summation of life's efforts leaves the materialistic individual "ansiosa y fatigada" and with a negative bottom-line, that is to say "un balance". A similar cynicism permeates stanzas six and seven with regards to art. The total commitment to art espoused in these stanzas, complete devotion to *l'art pour l'art*, is nevertheless susceptible to aesthetic modality, as the poetic "I" makes clear with the declaration that regardless of worth "tu obra no estará a la moda / de pasado mañana". This section of the poem closes with a reevaluation of faith. Similar to the previous pairings, the poetic speaker first proposes a return to orthodoxy and then exposes the implicit uncertainty. Devotion and piety are met with ambiguity, as evidenced when the poetic voice asks: "¿y si allá arriba / no me cubren la letra?". The uncertainty paradox underscored here remits the reader to the unresolved questioning of a higher power present in the previously cited poems of Gutiérrez Nájera and Casal. As with the Mexican, whose poetic speaker wondered "¿Quién rige la faena?" (Gutiérrez Nájera, 1966, p. 225), and the Cuban whose poetic voice prefers action to inaction, albeit from a subjective vantage point, Silva's question projects as wholly skeptical.

Stanzas ten through thirteen move beyond materialism, art, and faith to advocate self-reflection and a return to reason as the poetic voice proposes "[C]ompara religiones y sistemas / de la Biblia a Stuart Mill" (Silva, 2006, p. 256). Not only the mention of the Bible but also that of Herbert Spencer and Wilhem Wundt, clarify the poetic voice's comprehensive will towards fulfillment. With these foundational references, from the religious to the philosophy through the psychological, the philopoetic voice is figuratively promoting an exhaustive scrutinizing of knowledge systems as representation of introspection. However, the consequence becomes a broad destabilization of certainty of any kind. That is, knowledge becomes burden not blessing as the lyrical voice concludes: "Y cuando llegues en postrera hora / a la última morada, / sentirás una angustia matadora / de no haber hecho nada..." (Silva, 2006, p. 259). The purpose of the entire poem is to problematize the lyrical voice's sense of malcontent by reconsidering ideological pillars of bourgeoisie society, namely work, religion, reason, and pleasure. However, as the poetic voice posits, these projects of existence, whether a commitment to work or art, unquestioned religious faith, and austerity or unbridled pleasure seeking are rendered negligible

by humanity's ephemeral and subjective status. That is to say, the fallibility of all Existential projects is predicated by the infallible power of death. Yet, Silva's tone, sustained throughout the poem, projects a lyrical voice that is ludic and sarcastic, but not defeatist<sup>23</sup>.

In the vein developed here, most poems in Cruz e Sousa's *Últimos sonetos* (1905) could be persuasively interpreted as manifestations of Existential Poetics. For Lauro Junkes, with *Últimos sonetos* the Brazilian poet "revela-se um poeta essencialmente interiorizado. Consta-se, agora, até uma certa harmonia, um relativo equilíbrio ante o sofrimento, sublimado, dentro duma perspectiva transcendente" (1985, p. 7)<sup>24</sup>. The introspective quality underscored by Junkes is understandable given that Cruz e Sousa dealt with the problematic of being whilst facing his impending death<sup>25</sup>. For the purposes of analyzing speculative poems that deal with authenticity and engagement, I have chosen "Cogitação" and "Sorriso interior". In the first poem, "Cogitação", which translates to reflection in English, the main problem is set out in the octave and "resolved" in the sestet:

Ah! mas então tudo será baldado?!  
Tudo desfeito e tudo consumido?!  
No Ergástulo d'ergástulos perdido  
Tanto desejo e sonho soluçado?!

Tudo se abismará desesperado,  
Do desespero do Viver batido,  
Na convulsão de um único Gemido  
Nas entranhas da Terra concentrado?!

Nas espirais tremendas dos suspiros  
A alma congelará nos grandes giros,  
Rastejará e rugirá rolando?!

Ou entre estranhas sensações sombrias,  
Melancolias e melancolias,  
No eixo da alma de Hamlet irá girando?! (Cruz e Sousa, 1995, p. 185)

All four stanzas are organized as questions, centered on the apparent futility of life towards death, much like the other *memento mori* poems studied here. After each query there is an overt awareness of its unanswerability, a skepticism left unaltered by the ineffable poetic tone that dominates each stanza. The first stanza is explicit in the questioning of life's purpose, using the image of the Roman *ergastulum*, or slave prison, to depict existence as simultaneously irrational, transitory and inescapable. The images used project a captivity that is both senseless and exasperating. The second stanza continues with the anguished life motif and portrays living as punishing, that is "Viver batido", tying this stanza to the first via the Roman prison symbol. Invariably, the "entranhas da Terra", a metaphor for death, awaits the philopoetic voice.

The poem's enigmatic lyricism obfuscates any straightforward reading of the sestet. However, what is apparent is a focal shift from life to death, as the reflective "I" begins to speculate about the afterlife. With the shift, circularity becomes a central motif. Images such as "espirais", "giros" and "rolando", adjoin the idea of continuity with the indecipherability of the "life's significance" questions developed in the first two stanzas. In other words, circularity is an allusion to the eternally recurrent quality of the questions posed in the octave<sup>26</sup>. This idea is developed further in the sestet with a literary figure that still today embodies introspection.

Shakespeare's Hamlet appears at the conclusion of the poem as the personification of the eternally recurrent problem of finding relevance in an irrational existence. The adjectivization

presented in these last two stanzas further qualify the effects of pondering life's value, these produce somber and melancholic “sensações” that are perpetually “girando”. Again, the reiteration of spherical language such as “eixo” and “girando” affixes the concepts of perpetuity and Existential worth. The circular symbols also represent the impossibility of conclusively knowing, hence the gerund of verbs “girar” and “rolar” to denote continuity. In this vein, the philopoetic voice makes use of Shakespeare's infamous malcontent to embody the literal and figurative meaning of timelessness for the questions posed throughout the sonnet. Literally because he is a tragic Danish figure whose story is set in Medieval times, but not immortalized until the Elizabethan era and invoked by a Brazilian in *pré-modernismo* Latin America<sup>27</sup>. Figuratively because in the Shakespearian rendering he is the personification of the idea of “Cogitação” itself, and in this form, he became the archetype for the introspective being afflicted by choice and duty. In sum, Hamlet's appearance personifies the ideological core of the poem, that is, the question of the individual's duty to engage in the world despite the inescapability of death and the irrationality of existence.

If “Cogitação” takes up the question of Existential worth, “Sorriso Interior” outlines the meaning of authenticity for the individual confronted by this ineffable question, and by other disquieting Existential matters:

O ser que é ser e que jamais vacila  
Nas guerras imortais entra sem susto,  
Leva consigo esse brasão augusto  
Do grande amor, da nobre fé tranqüila.

Os abismos carnais da triste argila  
Ele os vence sem ânsias e sem custo...  
Fica sereno, num sorriso justo,  
Enquanto tudo em derredor oscila.

Ondas interiores de grandeza  
Dão-lhe essa glória em frente à Natureza,  
Esse esplendor, todo esse largo eflúvio.

O ser que é ser tranforma tudo em flores...  
E para ironizar as próprias dores  
Canta por entre as águas do Dilúvio! (Cruz e Sousa, 1995, p. 214)

“Sorriso Interior” appears towards the latter part of Cruz e Sousa's text. Numerous issues of Existential interest have already been engaged such as death as a stimulant to life (“Ironia das lágrimas”), ultimate freedom (“Livre!”), pain as a catalyst for belief (“Crê!”), and the brutal indifference of life (“Condenação Fatal”). With “Sorriso Interior” the poetic voice offers a code of conduct, an example of an authentic reaction to chaotic existence. In the poem, human existence is depicted as a constant struggle in the first stanza, made explicit with the allusion to war (“Nas guerras”). Life is also portrayed as abysmal and unstable in the second stanza, thus the use of “oscilação” to describe the poetic voice's surrounding. And to convey the magnitude of suffering that existence holds, the poetic “I” uses a Biblical illusion (“Dilúvio”), characterizing life as a deluge of pain in the fourth stanza.

In the midst of existence as detailed in this poem, the lyrical voice proposes a mode of action, an attitude to achieve Existential transcendence: irreverence. This audacity within an unpredictable and capricious reality recalls Camus's Sisyphus, and to an extent Vicente Ferreira da Silva's vitality. It merits mention that from this irreverent vitalist perspective, Cruz e Sousa's poem comes to exemplify Ferreira da Silva's take on Existential contentment, which

the Paulista philosopher understood as the “sentido lúdico da vida”, wherein the imposition of individual freedom is prioritized:

[V]arrer de nossa consciência o inessencial, o que não se relaciona com a ação que se busca por si mesma, votando à sátira, à ironia e ao escárneo todos os falsos ídolos. Só há uma seriedade séria; mas esta não é lúgubre e taciturna, crispada e sofredora, mas sim vivificante, generosa e criadora (1964, p. 141)<sup>28</sup>

In Cruz e Sousa’s poem, a purposefully ludic perspective is key to attaining a quantum of solace. Cruz e Sousa’s authentic being overcomes and sustains the weight of earthly chaos through self-realization and fortitude, that is “sem susto”. In the second stanza, the poetic “I” proposes serenity, thus the genuine existent “fica sereno”. The third stanza proposes that these behaviors of the “ser que é ser” are self-generated, thus these are “ondas *interiores* de grandeza”. Irony and defiance constitute the posture promoted by philopoetic “I” in the fourth stanza, as symbolized in the defiant song at the end. Collectively, these defiant attitudes culminate in the inner smile that gives the poem its title, a posture advocated by the lyrical voice, symbolic of Ferreira’s ludic understanding of life, and more explicitly Cruz e Sousa’s denotation of authentic being.

### 3. Latin American Presence

Kevin Aho remarks that his book *Existentialism* (2014) updates the origin story of Existentialism by expanding its geographic borders and contextualizes the various fields where it continues to be present. For Aho, Existentialism’s contemporaneity is evidenced by its cultural impact and “[f]or this reason, it cannot be dismissed as a moribund, decade-long episode in postwar France. Rather, it represents a centuries-long engagement with the most fundamental of human questions: ‘Who am I?’ and ‘How should I live?’” (2014, p. 17)<sup>29</sup>. Unfortunately, in expanding the story of Existentialism, Aho overlooks, like other historiographers, its concurrent presence in Latin America, inaccurately stating that “[w]ithout question, it was the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset who had the most influential role in introducing existentialist thought to the subcontinent” (2014, p. 13). As the poets discussed here show, the preoccupation with being in the modern world, what Aho called “the most fundamental of human questions” is ubiquitous in the philopoetic voices discussed. Furthermore, these poets engaged these questions from a distinctly Existentialist perspective from at least the end of the nineteenth century. That is to say, the same era universally accepted as foundational to twentieth-century Existentialism.

The speculative verses discussed here show that Jiménez accurately intuited an Existential Poetic thematic in *modernismo*, and that by broadening borders we could better appreciate its Pan-American quality. Their focus on the individually lived experience, a poetic impressionism concerned with detailing the emotive experience of uncertainty, reflect the pervasive struggles with insignificance common to them all. Gutiérrez Nájera and Cruz e Sousa were shown to be the most representative of the ontological lyricist, as both appeal to explicitly interrogatory verses to challenge notions of worth in a life ultimately destined towards death. Similarly, the Mexican and the Brazilian are concerned with the equalizing void left by a silent God, and propose opposite solutions to the apparent Existential stalemate they arrive at. Gutiérrez Nájera chooses pessimistic equanimity, whereas Cruz e Sousa opts for quiet defiance. Conversely, while both Casal and Silva approach the anxiety of modern being

from a skeptical perspective, the Cuban does not reject love and religion as means of attaining fulfillment whilst Silva remains unmoved by the promises of modernity.

As shown with the poets studied here, the anticipatory Existential Poetry of Latin America reaches back before Darío and Martí. Furthermore, the roots of literary Existentialism in Latin America share a chronological starting point in the nineteenth century with its more accurately dated European counterpart. Thus, other important figures beginning in the late nineteenth century, and going into the first few decades of the twentieth deserve our critical attention. Some underappreciated writers that have much to offer any history of Existentialism in the Americas are *modernistas* like Juana Borrero, Amado Nervo, María Vaz Ferreira, and Brazilians *simbolistas* like Raimundo Correia and Augusto dos Anjos. In prose, Joaquim Machado de Assis's *Cuentos* (1882) and Silva's *De sobremesa* (1925), along with philosophical works Fernando González Ochoa, Raimundo de Farias Brito, Jackson de Figueiredo and Moisés Vincenzi merit a similar historical treatment. Approaching the field of Existentialism from a broader perspective, wherein its manifestation in Latin America is not immediately presupposed as subsequent to its European equivalent, allows for the proper documenting of the philosophical complexity of both Hispanic *modernismo* and Brazilian *simbolismo*. Such an approach not only definitively moves these foundational literary eras beyond one-dimensional Ivory-Tower aestheticism, but also recognizes them as some of the first casualties of modernity and acknowledges their philopoetic concerns as timeless and thus contemporary.

## Notes

1. Hispanic *modernismo* and its analogous Brazilian *simbolismo* (also known as Parnassian Symbolism and part of the *pré-modernismo* era in Brazil) share French literary roots and ideologies. Both movements were inspired by the "*l'art pour l'art*" aesthetics of the French *parnassianisme* of Gautier, and the use of metaphors and sonorous verses of the *simbolisme* of Verlaine and Mallarmé. For Cathy L. Jrade the term *modernismo* refers to "the linguistically rich, formally innovative, and ideologically complex literary movement that began in Spanish America in the late 1870s and that lasted into the second decade of the twentieth century" (1998, p. 147). Much like Hispanic *modernismo* is born from the confluence of French literary influences, in Brazil, as Marta Peixoto explains "Parnassian and symbolist poetics became intertwined in actual practice, despite the sense some poets had, as we see from their polemics, that the two styles were contrary and inimical. Confluence was the norm rather than the exception" (1996, p. 234). Peixoto underscores how Brazilian poetry from the late nineteenth through the early twentieth century (*i.e.* Parnassian Symbolists) "assimilate a symbolist musicality, a fondness for liturgical and funereal rites, and for crepuscular and nocturnal landscapes. The Symbolists, in turn, some of whom had begun as Parnassians, retained a preference for the sonnet, for rare words and rare rhymes" (1996, p. 234). Both Latin American poetic movements share a common era. Specialists date Hispanic *modernismo* from the late 1880s to the 1920s, using Rubén Darío's coinage of the term and his monumental *Azul* both in 1888, as a starting point. The presence of Brazilian *simbolismo* into the twentieth century is evidence by Augusto dos Anjos's *Eu* (1912) and Eduardo Guimaraens's *A Divina Quimera* (1916).
2. Cesare Casarino employs the term *philopoesis* to describe "a certain kind of interference between philosophy and literature" (2002, p. 70). I am using *philopoetic* to allude to the confluence between philosophy and poetry. With regards the poets studied here, although much of the work produced by them wasn't published until the early twentieth century, they are all innately nineteenth-century poets, given their premature deaths, Casal in 1893, Gutiérrez Nájera in 1895, Silva in 1896, and Cruz e Sousa in 1898.
3. Hubert L. Dreyfus explains that the "founding existential thinkers, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, and Nietzsche, each begin with a description of the self and the culture in despair. Yet each of these thinkers make Christian bliss, or at least some sort of secular cheerfulness, the sign of a good life.

It seems that only in the twentieth century did existential thinking take a turn to the darker side characteristic of the thought of Jaspers and Heidegger, or the outright despair of writers such as Kafka, and of Sartre, the only self-proclaimed existentialist” (2006, p. 159).

4. Julián Marías explains that in Spain Existentialism wasn't pioneering: “Por esto, el existencialismo no ha sido una sorpresa en España, menos aún una revelación; más bien nos sorprende un poco ver presentar como el “último grito” ideas que hemos leído en español diez años, quince años, acaso treinta años antes” (1953, p. 14). William Barrett helped to introduce English readers to Spanish Existentialism: “Modern Spain has contributed two figures to existential philosophy, in Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936) and José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955). Unamuno, a poet first and last, wrote one of the most moving and genuine philosophic books of the whole movement; his *Tragic Sense of Life* is a work that fulfills, though in an anti-Nietzschean sense, Nietzsche's command to remain true to the earth” (1958, p. 16).
5. See for example the Dario-centric work of César Fernández Moreno “Para América Latina: Una poesía existencial” (1983), Francisco Peña Bermejo “El carácter existencial de la poesía de Rubén Darío y su presencia en la lírica española del siglo XX” (1993), Alberto Acereda “La modernidad existencial en la poesía de Rubén Darío” (2002) and Concepción Núñez Rey “Lo fatal: Búsqueda trascendente en la literatura hispanoamericana contemporánea” (2004).
6. Jiménez is clear about the complex of irrelevance that galvanized many *modernistas*: “la chatura cultural de una sociedad que, bajo las incitaciones prácticas del positivismo, se enriquecía en progreso, técnicas y bienes materiales, en la misma medida en que espiritual y estéticamente se empobrecía. Esa sociedad, en nombre de aquellos valores pragmáticos, y como se apuntó, marginaba o mecanizaba al creador de arte” (1989, p. 23).
7. Jiménez's thorough evaluation of José Martí's anticipatory Existentialism can be found in “Una aproximación existencial al “Prólogo al Poema del Niágara” de José Martí” (1993), and “Dos símbolos existenciales en la obra de José Martí” (1987).
8. In 1985, Jiménez uses the expression “poético-existencial” (p. 42), two years later in discussing José Martí's ideology he employs the expression “ético-existencial” (1987, p. 159). Generally what Jiménez is defining is Martí's Existentialist qualities, which the Cuban literary critic explains as such: “Junto a la penetración y vigencia de su pensamiento político-social, y al lado también de la profunda ética sobre la que se alza su originalísima concepción del ejercicio artístico de la palabra, hay en el ideario de José Martí dos nociones de permanente y universal validez. Una de ellas es su fervorosa afirmación de la vida [...] y, complementándola, la paralela convicción de que esa vida –que es en principio para el hombre su vida personal con lo que ella acarrea: nuestro carácter, nuestro criterio, las leyes que la rigen– no se sostiene sobre otra providencia que la propia y directa acción de quien, al vivirla, la construye y reconstruye con su sola y tenaz voluntad” (1987, p. 123).
9. Jonathan Judaken provides an etymology for the term “Existentialism”, attributing much to Gabriel Marcel “who in 1945 coined the term “Existentialism” to define the philosophy of the Sartrean camp. The adjective *existentielle* was borrowed from the German and dates back to 1908, and the term *existentialisme* originated in 1925. However, not until Marcel's epithet and Sartre's lecture did the word become famous” (2012, p. 110).
10. As Meri L. Clark explains: “Positivist thought influenced presidents, historians, doctors, sociologists, psychologists, criminologists, and novelists. Positivist heeded the call of governments to promote development and suppress –or, better yet, inhibit– disorder. “Positivism” had come to signify modern, European, scientific, prestigious, and progressive in Latin American academic and policy circles” (2010, p. 66).
11. Roberto Gargarella explains positivistic influence in the following manner: “Con la caída de la monarquía y el ascenso de la República, el general Deodoro da Fonseca quedó al frente del país, como su primer presidente. En su gabinete, los positivistas tuvieron un lugar destacado, en los Ministerios de Guerra (Constant) y Agricultura (Demetrio Ribeiro). Los positivistas tuvieron presencia, también, en las primeras discusiones en torno a la necesidad de adoptar una Constitución” (2014, p. 172). Pablo Guadarrama, likewise, stresses the foundational impact of the positivists: “El nacimiento de la república brasileña contó con el fermento ideológico de los positivistas, quienes abogaban por la separación del Estado y la Iglesia. El positivismo contribuyó a la caída del Imperio y al establecimiento de la República

- en Brasil en 1889, ya que los positivistas fueron los verdaderos ideólogos del nuevo proyecto republicano, aunque no lograron implantar su añorada república dictatorial. La consigna comteana de orden y progreso, enarbolada por estos se constituyó en el símbolo de la bandera de ese país. Sin embargo, el ideal de los positivistas brasileños era un gobierno autoritario y fuerte, aunque republicano. Aspiraban a una democracia controlada con un criterio de administración científica del Estado” (2004, p. 85).
12. Alberto Acereda explains that in “la poesía de Darío se halla una visión múltiple y moderna de variados intereses, interpretación plural que es avance de buena parte de las preocupaciones de la modernidad contemporánea en su signo existencial” (2002, p. 169).
  13. The Mexican is best remembered for his romantic elegies, such as “La duquesa Job”, “De blanco”, “Mis enlutadas” and “A un triste”. The Cuban’s pessimist attitudes are well documented in “Crepuscular”, “Neurosis”, “Nihilismo”, amongst a multitude of other poems, and in the aptly titled “El amante de las torturas”, a short story. Silva’s haunting “Nocturno” became a cultural icon in Colombia, commemorated on the back of the 5000-peso bill.
  14. See Alberto Acereda’s *El modernismo poético* (2001) and Rigoberto Guevara’s *Homogeneidad dentro de la heterogeneidad* (2009), for related interpretations of Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera’s work. An in-depth Existentialist reading, in the manner effected here, of Gutiérrez Nájera is available in my article “Irresoluciones en la poesía de Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera” *Estudios hispánicos*, 26 (2018).
  15. The most cited nineteenth-century figures are Kierkegaard, Dostoievski y Nietzsche. Historians refer to Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* (1843), *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments: A Mimetic-Pathetic-Dialectic Compilation, An Existential Plea* (1846). Chronologically, modern Latin American poetry emerges between Dostoievski and Nietzsche. Proto-Existentialism texts from Dostoievski are *Notes from Underground* (1864) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), Nietzsche’s most celebrated precursory Existentialism texts are *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* (1873), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883) and *The Genealogy of Morality* (1887), among others.
  16. The seventh stanza transmits this same idea: “los que el amor impulsa o la codicia mueve / buscando van la dicha. Su viaje será breve / y al fin de la jornada la muerte encontrarán” (Gutiérrez Nájera, 1966, p. 225).
  17. Salido López concludes that “lo verdaderamente llamativo es que en el contexto del Barroco esa enseñanza religiosa se complementa con la meditación sobre la muerte como motivo pedagógico ya desde la escuela de primeras letras. Por entonces, autores como fray Luis de Granada, Antonio de Alvarado, Tomás de Kempis o Juan Eusebio de Nieremberg, los grandes tratadistas sobre las postrimerías, irrumpen con fuerza en los manuales escolares de lectura y escritura, y sus enseñanzas son utilizadas como herramienta amedrentadora para la recta formación de los discentes. Evidentemente, mucho tiene que ver este fenómeno con la peculiar percepción de la muerte en el Barroco y con el halo macabro que la envuelve. Quienes se han ocupado del asunto han encontrado las causas de este aspecto de la mentalidad barroca en la alta mortandad de la época y en la intensa labor doctrinal de la Contrarreforma” (2015, pp. 242-243). Manuel Dries explains the Medievalist reflection on death as a motivational function, one of indoctrination through “constant reminders in word and image of one’s mortality, the *vanity* of earthly desire, and, as is well documented, a divine Last Judgement, the *memento mori* played a pivotal role in the functioning of the medieval conscience that guided people’s actions” (2017, pp. 37-38).
  18. Equally of relevance to fulfillment for Ortega y Gasset is *commitment* to an endeavor: “De aquí que el hombre tenga que *estar* siempre en alguna creencia y que la estructura de su vida dependa primordialmente de las creencias en qué *está* y que los cambios más decisivos en la humanidad sean los cambios de creencias, la intensificación o debilitación de las creencias. El diagnóstico de una existencia humana –de un hombre, de un pueblo, de una época– tiene que comenzar filiendo el repertorio de sus convicciones” (2007, p. 67).
  19. Martin Buber, a canonical Existentialist, explains God’s silence, *hester panim* literally “hiding of the face” in Jewish tradition, as interpellation for humanity: “God can never become an object for me; I can attain no other relation to Him than that of the I to its eternal Thou, that of the Thou to its eternal I. But if man is no longer able to attain this relation, if God is silent toward him, and he toward God, then something has taken place, not in human subjectivity but in Being itself. It would be worthier not



to explain it to oneself in sensational and incompetent sayings, such as that of the “death” of God, but to endure it as it is and at the same time to move existentially toward a new happening, toward that event in which the word between heaven and earth will again be heard. Thus, the perseverance of the “religious need,” to which Sartre objects and which he thinks contradicts the silence of the transcendent, instead points directly to the situation in which man becomes aware of this silence as such” (2016, p. 56).

20. Religious Existentialism, also referred to as Christian or Theistic Existentialism, has a well-documented history. Clancy Martin states that there are over a dozen figures, with Kierkegaard as the central figure, along with others such as Gabriel Marcel, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich and the aforementioned Unamuno and Buber. Martin explains that these Existentialists were “all of them prolific, who are properly understood as developing twentieth-century existentialism from a theistic, rather than an atheistic point of view. In fact, even among the atheists, who today are better remembered, the questions addressed by existentialism look suspiciously akin to religious (or perhaps better, spiritual) questions” (2006, p. 188).
21. This juxtaposition on the preferability of “quehacer” to passivity, inevitably recalls a foundational leitmotif of twentieth-century Existentialism, namely Camusian rebellion. It merits mention that for Camus rebelliousness was central to absurd existence (a positive way of confronting life). The French philosopher was clear on this position: “The absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself. The absurd is his extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance” (Camus, 1961, p. 41).
22. The whole of Silva’s work creates challenges because of the absence of original manuscripts. For example, *Gotas amargas*, first published as part of *Poesía* in 1908, has over the course of several editions undergone variations in content.
23. Several studies associate Hispanic American *modernismo* and Brazilian *simbolismo*, along with all the poets studied here, with European *decadence*. Jorge Olivares summarizes its history in Hispanic America in the following manner: “La suerte del decadentismo en Hispanoamérica es así: al principio el marbete pasa por su etapa censurable o de incertidumbre en que no se ha delineado con exactitud su carga semántica. Los académicos lo emplean para reprobar la nueva literatura y los que acabaran aceptando el ser denominados decadentes se sienten todavía algo incómodos ante tal apelativo. Después, la mayoría de los adeptos lo acoge como divisa de esta refinada sensibilidad; mientras otros se alían a la nueva estética, pero deploran la “palabreja” y favorecen a partir de 1893, más a menos, su bien establecido sinónimo, el epíteto “modernista.” En Hispanoamérica no hay un decadentismo puro; los hispanoamericanos lo acogen como una de las muchas preferencias que plasman el nuevo Modernismo, la más fuerte en su momento formativo y a eso se debe la frecuente sinonimia de ambos vocablos” (1980, p. 75). Bosi delianates a similar path in Brazil: “a percorrer a linha europeia do esteticismo, passando muitas vezes do Parnaso ao Simbolismo e outras tantas voltando ao ponto de partida. Vista desse ângulo, é apenas de grau a diferença entre o parnasiano e o decadentista brasileiro: naquele, o *culto da Forma*; neste, a *religião do Verbo*. Em outros termos: alarga-se de um para o outro o hiato entre a praxis e a atividade artística. O poeta, inserindo-se cada vez menos na teia da vida social, faz do exercício da arte a sua única missão e, no limite, um sacerdócio. A rigor, o caso brasileiro nada tem de excepcional e ilustra uma tendência formalizante pela qual o estilista Flaubert é o melhor precursor do hermético Mallarmé, o neoclássico Carducci daria lições ao decadente D’Annunzio; em suma, o Simbolismo, como técnica, é o sucedâneo fatal do Parnasianismo” (1984, p. 302). The poems studied here inherit the Decadent predilection for the autonomy of art, its ethical value as manifestation of exasperation with the futility of modern life, and the artist’s role a cultural exegete, earmarking them as Proto-Existentialists. However, in these poems, the Decadent predilection for deviant sensuality, the necessary lyrical depiction of melodrama, or the arbitrary cult of the bizarre is rejected.
24. As Andrade Murici explains in the introduction, poetic modernity in Brasil has much to do with the poet from Florianópolis: “Repelido pela sua raça e condenado, felizmente, a ser muito mais do que um grande poeta simbolista, o mais admirável cantor de seu povo, na realidade inaugurara não somente o Simbolismo, porém toda a poesia moderna do Brasil” (1995, p. 47).
25. Cruz e Sousa passes away from tuberculosis on March 19, 1898, in Antônio Carlos, Minas Gerais, Brazil having been diagnosed the year before.

26. For Nietzsche, bereft of God, the eternal recurrent can be a justification for life itself: “[I]f this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, “Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?” would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?” (1974, p. 274).
27. The legend of Amleth, from which Hamlet is derived, dates at least to the 13th century in Saxo Grammaticus’s *Gesta Danorum*. Shakespeare’s version is from 1600 and Cruz e Sousa invokes the Danish prince at the end of the nineteenth century.
28. The satisfaction of Camus’s Sisyphus is reminiscent of Cruz e Sousa’s defiant singer. Camus’s hero is content in his defiance: “Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (1961, p. 91).
29. Aho concludes that “[t]hese questions reverberate more powerfully than ever today as we struggle to find meaning and purpose in a secular world that is increasingly alienating, disjointed, and insecure” (2014, p. 17).

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